

Barbara Ruggiero
Education Committee Testimony
RE: Education Funding Bills SB 948, SB 949 and SB 886
Wednesday, March 3, 2021

I am Barbara Ruggiero, founder and Executive Director of Brass City Charter School, Waterbury's only charter school which opened in 2013 with grades Pre-k through 1. We have rolled out a new grade each year since then and will be graduating our first eight grade class this June.

BCCS' mission is to provide a rigorous academic and holistic social-emotional learning program that will eliminate the achievement gap for underserved students. Ten years ago, I am embarrassed to say, I had no understanding of the profound achievement gap that exists in CT. Why would CT have a gap that was so significant? Surely CT students are as capable as students from other states. And I discovered that charter schools have been addressing those disparities for over 20 years. Our state's public charter schools overwhelmingly serve low-income students and students of color which is true for BCCS which is highly representative of our City's population in terms of poverty and race. But because of how CT funds public education, the 11,000 mostly low-income, predominantly black and brown public charter school students have been profoundly underfunded. These students are more than deserving of equitable funding. Charter schools are defeating racist stereotypes that seek to put limits on children's futures. We believe at BCCS that all children, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, religion, ethnicity, or gender can grow, achieve, and be successful. We have very high expectations for our students and we help them fulfill those expectations. In our short history, we have twice been named a School of Distinction by the State Department of Education and have consistently and significantly outperformed our local district. Charter schools provide a quality education to students who often don't have access to great schools and their performance shows it. On the 2019 Smarter Balanced assessment, charter schools on average performed higher than their host districts and several charter schools performed higher than the state average. And this is true even though 64% of public charter school students come from low-income families and 80% of public charter school students are Black or Latino.

When we first opened, we had two months to announce that opening to the public. Despite the fact that we were an unknown, untested commodity, we ended our first lottery with a wait list. Last year we had over 600 students on our waitlist and with each year that list grows. It was clear that families want choice for their children. Throughout CT the demand for public charter schools has rapidly increased over the past two years. The latest waitlist includes over six thousand names, representing the families demanding access to these schools. To reiterate, public charter schools provide quality education to students who often don't have access to great schools.

On the school application, we have a section for parents to explain why they would like their child to attend BCCS. A parent who is currently on our waitlist stated:

"I would like my son to attend Brass City Charter School because I have been researching statistics and I realized that there is a big issue within inner cities surrounding the education gap and I liked that this school has very high proficiency rates and the mission of the school talks to aiming to decrease this gap. I also feel that it would be a great environment where my son will be exposed to a much more innovative process for learning... I also read on the website that this school is not a discriminatory environment which I feel would benefit my son, making him feel comfortable and safe. I also don't feel that the public schools in the area offer a challenging curriculum for its students but as a single parent I cannot afford private schooling so I believe BCCS would be a great fit for my son. I would love for him to have the

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opportunity of joining BCCS early on for pre-k so he can begin his grammar school education at the right place – BCCS.”

Parents know what they want for their children and they realize the importance of a first rate education.

This year in Governor Lamont’s proposed budget there is a per-pupil increase for charter school students. This increase will finally bring our students to the state’s foundation amount for education funding of \$11,525. The importance of this increase cannot be overstated. However, our students at Brass City, like so many other students in Waterbury, have unique challenges that will still be left unaddressed even with this funding increase. As I stated previously, 85.92% (CEP) of our students come from low-income families and live in a community affected by high concentrations of poverty. Truly, to be able to best serve our students and properly support them both academically and emotionally, charter schools need to be fully incorporated into the ECS formula and have the additional student need weighted funding applied.

This legislative session I implore this committee not only to stand with the Governor and support the proposed per-pupil increase for charter school students but to pursue equity at a deeper and more inclusive level by funding all public school students through the ECS formula.

Thank you for your consideration.

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